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DE RUEHYN #2171 3410850
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 070850Z DEC 09
FM AMEMBASSY SANAA
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UNCLAS SANAA 002171

SENSITIVE
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FOR NEA/PPD, NEA/ARP

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KPAQ](#) [YM](#)
SUBJECT: YEMEN'S LEADING INDEPENDENT NEWS SITE HACKED;
EVIDENCE POINTS TO ROYG

REF: SANAA 1835

11. (SBU) SUMMARY. On November 28, hackers attacked Yemen's leading independent news website NewsYemen, crashing the site and erasing its five-year news archive. Website editor Nabil al-Soufi blamed the Ministry of Telecommunications, citing evidence that the virus which destroyed the website originated in a Ministry office. NewsYemen remained offline until December 5, and its staff estimate that it will take months to fully reconstruct the website. If verified, the claims of ROYG involvement in the hacking suggest a dramatic escalation on the digital front of the ROYG's crackdown on independent media. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) On November 28, a computer virus struck Yemeni news website NewsYemen, crashing the site and erasing its five-year archive of news stories. (Comment: As Yemen's premier independent online news source, the NewsYemen website had been a critical resource for activists, scholars, and foreign missions in understanding events in Yemen, and has received roughly 40 million visits in the past five years. End Comment.) NewsYemen editor Nabil al-Soufi issued a public statement on December 4 accusing the Ministry of Telecommunications of orchestrating the attack. Citing evidence from NewsYemen's U.S.-based web hosting company Brinkster, the statement alleged that a user named Yaser al-Amad from within the Telecommunications Ministry's Internet Administration office sent the virus. "As if this disaster were not bad enough, it was made much worse when we learned that what happened was an exercise of the powers granted to the Ministry of Telecommunications," the statement read. A November 28 cyber-attack which crashed state-owned internet service provider YemenNet, for which no one has claimed responsibility, was rumored to be an act of retaliation by supporters of NewsYemen.

YEARS OF WORK, GONE IN MINUTES

13. (SBU) Soufi told PolOff on December 3, "I have lost five years of my life's work. I feel like I have been robbed ... I was deceived into thinking there was press freedom in Yemen." Soufi estimated the material loss from the attack at \$200,000 and feared that if he could not recover the lost data quickly, he might have to fire his eight staff members. On December 5, the website came back online with a skeletal homepage featuring stories about the hacking. The lead story explained that NewsYemen's technical team would undertake three initiatives: "first, restoring the homepage to allow the publication of new stories; second, working with technical support in the U.S. and the Ministry of Telecommunications to identify the culprit and restore the archives; and third, redesigning the website to make it more secure."

ROYG DENIES INVOLVEMENT

14. (SBU) On December 5, Soufi met with Telecommunications

Minister Kamal Hussein al-Jabri. Jabri denied any involvement by the Ministry in the incident and assured Soufi that those responsible would be prosecuted. Soufi told EmbOff he was not convinced and still believed that the ROYG was responsible for the attack. He intends to present the evidence implicating the Ministry of Telecommunications before a court of law.

AN EASY TARGET

¶5. (SBU) Soufi cited several reasons why he suspected the ROYG would target NewsYemen. Soufi told PolOff on December 3 that he had twice traveled to Sa'ada governorate to report on the ongoing Houthi conflict. He had already published one story and was preparing to publish another when the hacking occurred. The ROYG has bristled at independent reporting on the Sa'ada conflict (reftel). Soufi also said he had been targeted because, unlike other journalists, he does not have connections with powerful tribal leaders or government figures.

COMMENT

¶6. (SBU) In a media landscape where most outlets are controlled either by the ROYG or by opposition parties, NewsYemen was a rare beacon of responsible, independent journalism. The attack on NewsYemen provides a dismal bookend for a year of unprecedented assaults on press freedom in Yemen, including legal prosecution and extralegal abduction of responsible journalists, censoring articles, blocking websites, and shuttering independent newspapers. END COMMENT.
BRYAN